



Department of Justice

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EL PASO MAN PLEADS GUILTY TO THREATENING VIOLENCE TO OBSTRUCT FREE EXERCISE OF RELIGION

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Justice Department today announced that Jared Bjarnason of El Paso, Texas, pleaded guilty today to threatening violence in order to obstruct members of the Islamic Center of El Paso in Texas in the free exercise of their religion, and to transmitting a communication containing a threat to injure members of the Islamic Center.

Bjarnason admitted that on April 18, 2004, he sent an e-mail message to the Islamic Center of El Paso threatening violence against the Islamic Center and its members. Specifically, the message threatened to turn the Islamic Center into “the center of death and destruction” and to burn the Islamic Center’s mosque to the ground, if hostages held in Iraq were not freed within three days.

“As President Bush has said, ‘Those who feel like they can intimidate our fellow citizens to take out their anger don’t represent the best of America; they represent the worst of humankind, and they should be ashamed of that kind of behavior,’” said R. Alexander Acosta, Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Rights Division.

“In these difficult times we cannot lose sight of the freedoms we hold dear in the United States, including the freedom to worship as we see fit. Our office will aggressively prosecute anyone who, through criminal acts, threatens, intimidates, or harms people on account of their religious beliefs,” stated U.S. Attorney Johnny Sutton, Western District of Texas.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation investigated the threat against the Islamic Center. The FBI employed a provision of the USA PATRIOT Act that permits providers of electronic mail services to provide electronic communications directly to law enforcement officials “if the provider reasonably believes that an emergency involving immediate danger of death or serious physical injury to any person justifies disclosure of the information.”

With the PATRIOT Act’s authority, the FBI was able to trace the threatening e-mail well before the expiration of the three-day deadline contained in the threat. Absent this provision, investigating authorities would have had to obtain a separate search warrant from each service provider through whose system the e-mail traveled, a process which could have taken over 30 days.

Bjarnason faces up to twenty years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. Sentencing is scheduled for December 21, 2004.

This was one of two incidents of violence against the Islamic Center this year. In addition to the incident to which Bjarnason pleaded guilty today, a complaint recently filed in federal court alleges that on September 17, 2004, Antonio Nunez-Flores threw two “Molotov

Cocktails” at the Islamic Center building. The charges against Nunez-Flores carry a maximum possible sentence of ten years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. All detainees are considered innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. The fact that complaint has been filed is not evidence of guilt.

The Civil Rights Division, United States Attorneys’ Offices, and the FBI have investigated nearly 600 incidents of alleged bias-motivated crimes against individuals perceived to be of Middle Eastern origin since September 11, 2001. There have been 19 federal prosecutions of 24 defendants brought to date. In addition, there have been nearly 150 state and local prosecutions initiated.

The case is being prosecuted jointly by attorneys from the Civil Rights Division and the United States Attorney’s Office for the Western District of Texas.

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